

This inventory cannot provide a complete account of all of the potential natural areas of Bladen County. No lands were surveyed without the landowner's expressed permission. For some tracts targeted for survey the owner could not be located, or permission to survey was not granted. Although aerial photography, topographic and soil maps, and land use images are helpful in identifying potential natural areas, on-site visits are necessary to determine a site's condition and quality, and which natural features are present. It is possible that new high quality natural areas will be found over time as formerly inaccessible or unknown areas become available for study.

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AREA**

### **STUDY AREA**

This report describes the natural area inventory of Bladen County, located in the Middle Coastal Plain and bisected by Cape Fear River (Figure 1). It is bordered by Sampson County along the east, by Pender County at the southeast corner, Columbus County along the south, Robeson County along the west, and Cumberland County along the north (Figure 2). South River and Black River form the eastern border of the county, while Big Swamp forms the western border. As of 1999, approximately 74% of the land surface of Bladen County was forested. At 875 square miles, it is the fourth largest of North Carolina's 100 counties. With a population of 32,278 (2000 census), it is the ninth least densely populated of those 100 counties, with about 37 people per square mile. Elizabethtown, the county seat, is the largest community in the county with 3,700 people. State lands in natural condition or managed for forest products cover about 9% of the county, with the N.C. Division of Forest Resources the largest public landholder with about 33,000 acres in Bladen Lakes State Forest. Other large public landholders are N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission with about 8,900 acres (mostly Suggs Mill Pond Game Land), and N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation with about 6,500 acres at Jones Lake State Park, Singletary Lake State Park, Bay Tree Lake State, and White Lake State Lake (nearly 3,600 acres of the state park holdings are lake waters).

### **TOPOGRAPHY AND PHYSIOGRAPHY**

Cape Fear River is the central feature of Bladen County, and it is the boundary between the physiographic areas that comprise the county's land-and-water surface. The area west of the river is a relatively flat to gently rolling terrace of ancient marine sediments. The Cape Fear River itself is bounded by bluffs on both sides from Cumberland County downstream to near Elizabethtown, and intermittently below Elizabethtown, mostly along the west/southwest side of the river. The area east of the river is characterised by a reworking of ancient marine deposits by wind and water. Its most striking geomorphic feature is a series of small to large Carolina bays, which are elliptical basins surrounded by low sand rims and aligned along a northwest/southeast axis. These unusual features are found along the Coastal Plain from the mid-Atlantic to Georgia, and are concentrated in eastern North and South Carolina. Their origin is unknown, but wind erosion upon bodies of water left by receding seas during the last Ice Age is a leading hypothesis. Eastern Bladen County contains the majority of the largest concentration of largely unaltered Carolina bays remaining within the global range of this feature of the Atlantic Coastal